Applying for a Research Degree at ISF

Purpose

This document describes the selection criteria and assessment process for applying for a research degree at the Institute for Sustainable Futures (ISF), University of Technology Sydney (UTS). ISF offers two degrees: a Masters by Research and a PhD. Places and scholarships are limited and are awarded through a competitive application process.

Overview of application process

Prospective applicants should follow the process outlined below. ISF requires all applicants to first apply directly to ISF for pre-approval before submitting an enrolment application to UTS. Applicants that do not follow this process will not be considered.

1. Contact ISF to express interest in a research degree. Initial contact can be made directly to a potential supervisor, or through the general ISF email address (isf@uts.edu.au).
2. Fill out a short Expression of Interest (EOI) form with more details about your research interests and proposed topic.
3. ISF will use the EOI to identify potential supervisors who will contact you to discuss the proposal and work with you to develop your application.
5. Your application will be assessed by the ISF Board of Studies to determine if you are eligible for a research degree and to rank your application relative to other applicants.
6. Applicants that are deemed eligible by the ISF Board of Studies will be invited to submit an enrolment application to UTS.
7. Once UTS has approved the application, scholarships will be awarded based on the rankings determined by the ISF Board of Studies.

The ISF Board of Studies

The membership of the ISF Board of Studies comprises:

- Director, ISF (Chair)
- ISF’s Responsible Academic Officers
• An ISF Research Administrator
• Two student representatives.


Preparing your application

Your application must include the following information, preferably in the order listed:

1. Administrative details:
   a. Your name
   b. The names of your proposed supervisors. All UTS students require two or more supervisors, although it is reasonable to have only a single supervisor identified at application stage.
   c. Country/ies of citizenship
   d. What course you want to enroll in (Masters or PhD)
   e. Whether you plan to be full-time (minimum 35 hours per week spent on your research) or part-time (minimum 17.5 hours per week)
   f. Your plan for covering tuition fees for your degree, i.e. would you like to be considered for a scholarship that covers tuition fees, or do you have another funding source?
   g. Your plan for covering living costs during your research degree, i.e. would you like to be considered for a scholarship that includes a living allowance, will you work part-time etc?

2. A detailed CV that includes full contact details and outlines your professional experience, previous education, publications and other research outputs, other achievements, and referees. UTS provides a template for CVs that you can use, although use of this template is not compulsory for the ISF application.

3. Academic transcripts for your previous degrees.

4. A detailed research proposal (see below for guidance on how to structure this). The research proposal must be submitted as a separate document to the rest of the application.

5. Written responses to the following assessment criteria (see below for more details on what we’re looking for in these responses):
   a. Performance during your previous degrees
   b. Your professional and research experience
   c. Your research outputs and achievements to date
   d. Alignment of your research with ISF and UTS strategic objectives.

In addition, your proposed supervisor will need to prepare a confidential assessment of your suitability for a research degree at ISF based on their interactions with you prior to submission. This will be submitted separately to the ISF Board of Studies and will not be viewed by the applicant.
Your research proposal

The research proposal is a crucial element of your application, as it allows us to judge the quality of your early research framing and design, as well as the match with ISF research interests. We are looking for excellence in critical thinking and communication skills and some familiarity with relevant research literature and academic writing conventions.

Please take care to avoid plagiarism. You can find more advice on plagiarism and how to avoid it here: https://www.uts.edu.au/current-students/support/helps/self-help-resources/referencing-and-plagiarism. Research proposals are reviewed using iThenticate software to identify plagiarism. Serious plagiarism will lead to rejection of your application.

Proposals will typically be about 5 – 10 pages in length. A suggested structure is as follows.

**Introduction and Significance (1 page)**

- Introduce the need for your research, moving from the general dimensions of the research challenge to the specific part of this challenge that you intend to address (your ‘niche’)
- Make a case for the significance and importance of your intended research. Why does it matter? To whom? What use will it be? How will it contribute to sustainable futures?
- What is your overarching research aim and/or objectives?

**Literature and practice review (1 – 4 pages)**

- Explain the background to the research problem through a review of relevant literature (and if appropriate a summary of experience from your professional practice) that demonstrates a sound knowledge of past and recent work in your domain of interest. Be sure to include peer-reviewed literature in your reading and analysis, as well as popular and/or industry material if that is relevant.
- Summarise and critique the main findings reported by others and identify any gaps in literature or practice that you intend to address through your research.

**Proposed Research Questions (½ –1 page)**

- Link your findings from the literature review with your own ideas. That is, specifically, what will you ask and answer? Are there any hypotheses to be tested?
- What are the expected outcomes from answering these questions?

**Preliminary Research Design (1 - 2 pages)**

- Theoretical Framework: What are your preliminary ideas about theoretical frameworks that might guide your study?
- Methodology: What methodology fits well with your questions and your theoretical framework; e.g. do you plan to set up a mainly quantitative or qualitative study or something in between? Are you thinking of using case studies, surveys, interviews, models or some other method?
- Data: What type of data will help you answer the questions? Where and how will you collect the data?
- Analysis: What are your initial thoughts on how you will analyse and make sense of your data?
Budget (½ - 1 page)

- Think through the costs of your study and specify how you plan to cover them. Distinguish between your project costs (e.g. travel, fieldwork, software, etc) and your personal costs for undertaking postgraduate study (living allowance, tuition fees, etc). ISF offers, by application, up to $1,500 to cover costs of doing the research and up to $8,000 for professional development (up to $4,000 for Masters). Funding will need to be sought for costs beyond these amounts.

References (1 page)

- List your readings.

Assessment criteria

Performance during your previous degrees

To supplement your academic transcripts, please provide a response that covers the following:

- Your grades during your previous degrees and anything you can say about how they compare to your cohort. This could include information on average performance (e.g. Distinction average), Grade Point Average (GPA) or that you were in the top x% of your degree or particular relevant subjects.

- Any prizes or awards you received during your previous degrees.

- Any research experience you gained during your previous degrees, e.g. theses produced during your degrees, particular subjects with a strong research component and associated outputs. Clearly indicate the component of each degree that was focused on research, e.g. my masters by research was 2 years full time, or my honours thesis accounted for 50% of my fulltime workload and took 1 year to complete.

- Any other information that demonstrates how your previous degrees have prepared you to undertake a research degree.

If you think it will help your application, you may wish to comment on the prestigiousness of the institution that awarded your degree to help us put your performance into context.

Professional and research experience

To supplement the list of previous roles in your CV, please discuss the extent and impact of your professional experience and how it has prepared you to undertake a research degree. ‘Professional experience’ should be interpreted broadly – we are interested in paid employment, volunteer or community roles and ‘life experience’. We are particularly looking for evidence of the following:

- Development of research skills during your previous roles

- That your work has had a demonstrated impact

- Relevance of your experience to the topic you are proposing to research.

We assess the strength of your professional experience relative to opportunity, which means we take into account the career stage you are at. This means a recent graduate is not disadvantaged relative to an experienced professional. Please state how many years of professional experience you have to assist with this assessment.
Research outputs and achievements

To supplement the list of research outputs and achievements in your CV, please provide a discussion of the quality and impact of your research outputs and other achievements. Research outputs include publications (e.g. research reports, blog posts, contributions to industry publications, conference papers, academic journal papers, etc), and presentations (e.g. seminars, conferences, digital media, etc).

A simple way to present this information is in a table that lists each output and discusses any available measures or evidence of its quality and impact. This could include diverse indicators, such as:

- Impact factor and citation counts for journal articles, or other demonstration of the standing of a journal
- Evidence of the standing of a conference that you presented at
- Number of views or downloads for online publications
- Size of audience and prestige of event for presentations
- Feedback received in response to research outputs
- Changes resulting from research outputs, such as policy or institutional changes or adoption of findings in practice.

It is helpful if the ISF Board of Studies is able to access examples of research outputs for review. Please aim to provide access to at least one of your strongest research outputs, either by providing a web link or by including it with your application.

Please also make your role in producing research outputs clear, i.e. were you the lead author, part of a research team, a research assistant that worked on one specific task etc?

Alignment with ISF and UTS Strategic Objectives

Provide a brief discussion (no more than 1 page) of how your research aligns with ISF and UTS strategic objectives. You can review ISF’s current priorities on our website at www.isf.uts.edu.au and a copy of the current ISF Strategic Plan is available on request. The UTS Strategic Plan is available here. You should discuss this with your proposed supervisor, who can also provide details on the research priorities of specific ISF Research Areas and how your research can fit with these.